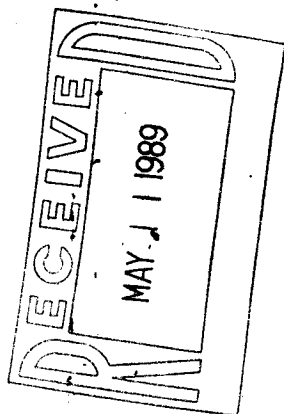


REPORT ON REELFOOT REFUGE DEVELOPMENT
AND SUCCESS OF PROGRAMReport of
1943Historical Information

Reelfoot Lake was formed during the winter of 1811-12 by a general settling of the land between the Mississippi River and the high lands to the east. The original cover had been of cypress, gum and cotton wood brakes with small sloughs intertwined. Originally the land was subject to over flow and could have been considered as wet and of a bottom land type, i.e., flood plain forest. With the occurrence of the earthquake these bottom lands were flooded and a lake was formed where once there had been a forest. Most of the trees died due to flooding but a good many of the cypress in the shallower waters have continued to grow at a very reduced rate.

It was not until about 1820 that the general area of Reelfoot Lake was described by an authentic historian. On November 21, 1820, eight years after the 'quake, John James Audubon visited New Madrid, Missouri which lies about 12 miles west of Reelfoot Lake in the "Big Bend" country along the Mississippi River. His remarks about the country and inhabitants bear repeating because in some respects time has changed things very little. To quote him, "This almost deserted village (New Madrid) is one of the poorest that is seen on the river having a name; the County back was represented to us as being good, but the looks of the inhabitants contradicted strongly their assertions—they are clad in Buckskin pantaloons and a sort of a shirt of the same, This is seldom put aside unless so ragged or so Blooded and Greased that it will become disagreeable even to the poor wrecks that have it on—. The Indian is more decent, better off, and a thousand times more happy—. Here family dicensions are at their Zenith, and to kill a Neighbor is but more than a Kill Deer or Raccoon—". How true today.



In the small hamlet of Samburg, Tennessee within the last generation (adults) eleven men have met violent death from gun fire. Two months ago two deputy sherrifs were shot to death and five days ago an ex-sherrif, Robert McKain, was killed by two shot gun blasts as he sat before his reading lamp at home. His wife was severely injured also. Harry Kennon and his flunky who runs a "dive" on Reslfoot Lake near the Spillway have confessed their participation in this most heinous crime.

Whiskey making, robbery and general outlawry were and are yet to some extent the stock and trade of many individuals. In the year 1890 an attempt was made to control the Lake and drain same by the West Tennessee Land Company. Local inhabitants hung by the neck until dead one of the company lawyers and more or less intimidated all opposition so that the company never once again pressed its claims. However in 1921 certain influences which are existent today and located mainly in Lake County tried unsuccessfully to drain the Lake and put the bottom into farm lands. A ditch was dug from the Spillway to the Obion River "scatters". It was planned to plug the confluence of the ditch and the Lake but when the ditch was dug someone "accidentally" set the dredge afire and it was thought that inasmuch as the means were destroyed whereby the control structure at the Lake's outlet could be built the Lake would naturally drain and nothing more be said or done. Whoever was the perpetrator of this scheme did not reckon with the local fishermen who had already hung one man and threatened many more who crossed their path. When the dredge burned the fishermen got sandbags and plugged the outlet of the Lake and with loaded guns kept watch day and night. Into this picture of local civil war, Governor Pea appeared and directed the Legislature to appropriate money for the purchase of the West Tennessee Land Company holdings and riparian rights along the bank of the Lake. A bill was also passed in 1929 after considerable bickering providing for the construction of a spillway—

(public acts of 1925, House bill # 64, Chapter 18) at the outlet of the Lake which had been sandbagged and protected by fishermen. The bill in part states — "That no spillway shall be built of a lesser level than the present spillway." And so it came to pass that a twenty flume concrete spillway was established at the outlet of the Lake, but instead of making it an overflow type to abide by the law as quoted above it was so constructed that the dam boards controlled fourteen inches of water and these dam boards ~~from~~ through political pressure from Lake County farmers were more or less kept up so that the Lake actually was kept fourteen inches lower than anticipated by House Bill # 64. Since 1937 not once were the gates lowered in order to provide a Lake as called for by the Legislature of the State of Tennessee.

On March 24, 1942 The Fish & Wildlife Service through the Director at Washington, D: C. gave orders to lower the gates to the resident Manager of the Reelfoot Refuge and the Lake since that time has been kept at the level prescribed by Tennessee law. This action came as the lease between the State of Tennessee and the Federal Government became operative. This lease became effective after the State of Tennessee leased to the Government for a seventy-five year period about one third of the Lake for Waterfowl Refuge purposes and control of the entire Lake for improvement and water manipulation.

During the period from 1921 when the Lake was lowered through action of the drain ditch and subsequent raising of the fourteen inch gates, the upper reaches became clogged with ever encroaching giant cut-grass and lotus, etc. Old bottom lands which had remained flooded under normal conditions and provided excellent Mallard duck feeding areas became dry and useless for waterfowl. Valuable shoal waters grew up to cut-grass and prohibited use of the area in general except for deep water pockets for ducks and geese.

Accompanying this systematic lowering of the Lake the upper reaches of Reelfoot ~~LEAK~~ Creek were cleared and farmed allowing this stream and tributaries to erode and carry in suspension thousands of tons of silt into the Lake. The combined effect of siltation and ecological succession tended to convert vast acreages of Reelfoot Lake into land of useless marsh types. In 1941 the Lake was fast nearing its climax, i.e. dry land.

Management Program

The single most important management feature to save the Lake was carried out in about twenty minutes by lowering the gates and getting fourteen inches more of water. This had helped immensely but not to the entire satisfaction of the local people. Most of the opposition can be traced to a small group of Lake County farmers, already mentioned above, who filed a complaint against the Government for flooding cypress brakes they had attempted to put into farm land along the margins of the Lake. Practically all other people, both local and non-resident sportsmen are pleased with a normal Lake level. Following procurement of a normal Lake much obnoxious vegetation was destroyed through manipulation of two under water weed cutters which were operated by the Fish & Wildlife Service. About 800 acres were cut over and of this amount perhaps 400 acres actually controlled.

In November, 1942, a large barge, on which was mounted a drag-line using a clam shell dipper, initiated a channel clearing program. Already the upper and lower Lakes have been connected by a 1600 foot cut through the "Beaver Dam". Plans call for channels to be dug through "Horse Island", "Rag Point, from Bayou du Chien to Brewer's Bar, Rat Island cut, Swan Gap, Little Ronaldson--Big Ronaldson, and many others.

Although there is a profusion of plant life in Reelfoot Lake there is some belief that the planting of desirable species of aquatic vegetation can and will prove useful. Already 300 pounds of aquatics such as sago pondweed, bullrush, smartweed, etc. have been sown.

The current rate of deposition of silt will, regardless of all other management features, fill the Lake in a few number of years, and of this The Fish & Wildlife Service is fully cognizant. Either settling basins or diversion of Reelfoot Creek is planned.

In order to properly control the water levels of the Lake, the outlet ditch is now being dredged to the Obion River by state penal institutions with money provided by the State Conservation Department (\$50,000.) and plans by the Fish & Wildlife Service which also furnished one $1\frac{1}{2}$ yard dragline and four trucks with numerous small hand tools. A twenty foot section is to be built onto the present spillway to provide lowering the Lake to such a depth that the cut-grass can be effectively burned and thereby controlled. Also in connection with the spillway structure a Barr Fishway will be built to provide adequate travel facilities for migrating fish which normally would come up the Obion River into Reelfoot Lake.

About twenty-five years ago the last pair of beaver were exterminated from Reelfoot Lake by local trappers. Last summer, 1942, the State of Mississippi gave to the Fish & Wildlife Service two pairs and these were promptly called for at Potts Camp, Mississippi and placed on Grassy Island by the Refuge Manager and Asst. Biologist, John Steenis. Since then one pair have evidently set up house keeping and baby rearing in earnest, on Bayou du Chien near Mud Basin. The other two are covorting around Edwards Pond in a big willow thicket where they have built a house with one end open in which one can a beaver most any time of the day.

Thousands of willow trees have been cut down and the bark trimmed off. It is supprising how many willow four beaver can cut. Some of the feed beds are several yards in diameter which look like large drifts of willow wood with the bark peeled off. It is evident that feeding occurs as far away as one mile from the place of abode.

Fur animals are protected and should increase in the Refuge. Especially is this true of muskrat, 'coon and mink. Deer are already present on the State lands and should now migrate to Grassy Island with adequate protection.

During the last twenty years the Lake, as stated before, was kept at a low level. This distroyed or made unavailable large areas for waterfowl reproduction and use. Accompanied by this, good roads , an ever increasing number of hunters and laxity of law enforcement, practically prohibited the good duck shooting for which Reelfoot Lake was long famous. After the Lake level was restored, a record number of Wood Duck nested around the Lake and it should be noted that all local "OLD TIMERS" concede there were more wood ducks last year--1942 than they had ever seen before. During late August flocks of these birds with several hundred in each were not uncommon.

Practically all sportamen and others believed the Refuge would seriously detract from duck shooting but as most would admit, "it could not be any worse than we had in 1942" Much to the surprise of everyone, ducks stayed at Reelfoot this year and when hard pressed would "gang up" in the Refuge areas in incredible numbers during days of excessive shooting. This kept a large number of birds currently present which would tend to sift out over the hunting areas when the pressure slackened. On December 12, 1942, 120 Ringneck ducks were shot out of one blind by twelve hunters in the upper end of the Gourd. Two guides were seen to kill 40 Mallard ducks (arrests ~~was~~ made) in good old market hunter fashion in one half day.

Almost everyone who hunted on the Lake stated it was the best hunting in twenty years.

Bass fishing has been getting consistently better the last few years. This is due to the fact that the State closed down all commercial fishing for bass and actually enforced the law. Sport fishing on the upper end of the Lake was better last summer than ever before and this fact is attributed to plenty of water. Commercial fishing has been reduced to a bare existence level for the local fisherman. Most of the rough fish have been caught and there is continual fighting and bickering sportsmen, commercial fishermen and the Conservation Department about game fish netting. The commercial fishermen usually have their way but their catches are continually getting smaller and smaller. The sports find fewer and fewer game fish of course where netting is prevalent, —lower end of Lake and no one is satisfied. On all fairness to ~~ht~~ those concerned, it is felt there is a place for the commercial fishermen. Let him abide by the State laws— 2 inch mesh nets and size limits. Close all fishing during spawning season— March and April, This would hurt everyone for ~~ht~~ awhile but the medicine would not be worse than the cure.

Respectfully submitted,

Harry E. Adams,
Asst. Refuge Manager.